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ABSTRACT

This brief identifies advantages and challenges to using video-based distance education for adult English language learners (ELLs), describing implementation alternatives and suggesting practical implementation strategies. Advantages include multiple mentoring opportunities and the ability to reach more learners. Challenges include identifying learners who can succeed at a distance, training teachers, funding, and assessment and accountability. Implementing video-based distance education involves accessing videos and providing instructional support. Suggestions for implementation include using forms (goal setting forms, study plan forms, and learner logs) and building community among learners to prevent learner isolation. Evaluation studies provide evidence that video-based distance education programs are popular with students and attract many who may be unwilling or unable to attend traditional classes. Teachers report that students in video-based distance education programs make education gains. However, more rigorous research with control groups and standardized pre- and post-testing procedures are recommended. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.) (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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ERIC Brief

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Video-Based Distance Education for Adult English Language Learners

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The number of adult learners who need or want access to English language instruction exceeds the available space in classroom-based English as a second language (ESL) programs (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003). Where instructional services are available, adults report barriers to participation including lack of time to study, childcare, and transportation issues (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). To meet the needs of English language learners, adult ESL programs are implementing a variety of educational opportunities including distance education.

Distance education involves "any formal instruction in which a majority of the teaching occurs while educator and learner are at a distance from one another" (Verduin & Clark, 1991, p. 19). Today a variety of technologies are used to deliver content at a distance including videos, telecourses, video conferencing, correspondence courses, and Internet-based instruction. Video-based distance education is a popular form of distance education. It utilizes preproduced videos, requires minimal technological skills on the part of the teacher and the learner, and can be structured to facilitate independent home study and periodic one-on-one or group instruction.

This brief identifies advantages and challenges with using video-based distance education for adult English language learners, describes implementation alternatives, and suggests practical implementation strategies.

Advantages

Reaching More Learners

Because video-based distance education uses an asynchronous delivery method, learners who work at more than one job and whose responsibilities conflict with the time of regular class offerings can study whenever they have time. Those with transportation or childcare problems can study without leaving their homes. Learners who need to acquire new skills expediently can progress through the materials at a rapid pace; others may need or want to move through the program at a slower pace.

Are English language learners who would otherwise not be receiving instruction accessing this option? Many learners participating in distance learning via the video-based series *Crossroads Café* report that they do not have access to traditional classes (Center for Impact Research, 2002). In California, the state's Innovation and Alternative Instructional Delivery Program allows adult schools to spend up to 5% of their block grants on innovative programs including distance education using video. Between 2000 and 2002, 90% of the learners in the Innovation Programs were ESL learners (Porter, 2002).

Multiple Mentoring Opportunities

Because participants can view the videos at home, they can share and discuss the lessons with their children, other family members, and friends. Some video-based distance education programs report learners also taking videos and accompanying text materials to work with them to view and discuss with co-workers (Center for Impact Research, 2002; Ramirez & Savage, 2001).

Challenges

Identifying Learners Who Can Succeed at a Distance

Distance education learners—whether enrolled in an Internet-based class, a correspondence course, or a video-based program—must decide when and where they will study, identify their learning goals, request assistance when needed, and fulfill assignments in a timely manner to promote progress. They need self-discipline to engage regularly in study. Because learners can feel unprepared, isolated, and overwhelmed with their new responsibilities, resources to assess learner readiness for independent study should be provided to programs and instructors. (See Guglielmino, 1977; Public Broadcast System [PBS], 2001).

Another issue in identifying successful distance learners is the participant's English proficiency and literacy. More than 50% of English language learners enrolled in state-administered adult education programs are at the beginning literacy and beginning ESL levels of instruction (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2002). It is not known how many of these learners are being served in video-based distance education programs. However, in California, 21.7% of the ESL learners enrolled in distance education programs are at the literacy or beginning levels of English (Porter, 2002). How do these lower level learners fare? A national pilot study of the *Crossroads Café* program found that learners who completed the course had lived in the United States 19 months

longer, had a year more previous education in their countries, and had taken more ESL instruction previous to the distance project than those who started but did not complete the course (Rudes, Hopstcok, Stephenson, & Zehler, 1999). This suggests that persistence in video-based education may be problematic for beginning-level learners.

Training Teachers

Distance educators need to learn how to help learners focus on learning needs and goals in short instructional periods. Teachers may need training in this. Additionally, programs need to identify ways to support teachers who fear change as they implement distance education programs. Sharing guidelines developed by other teachers (American Federation of Teachers, 1996), especially language teachers (California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [CATESOL], 1995), can help alleviate resistance. Also helpful are general resources on delivering instruction through distance learning. (See, for example, Howard & McGrath, 1995).

Funding Issues

Although there are state and federal grants available to support distance education programming, the challenge programs face is finding reliable, sustained funding to establish courses and provide ongoing improvement. Funds are needed to develop an infrastructure for distance education as well as to purchase materials, train teachers, and develop outreach materials. Not all states have a funding formula that allows for reimbursement for learners in distance education programs (Center for Impact Research, 2002). A national survey of adult education directors conducted in 1998 found that although 31 states have started or plan to start a distance education initiative for adult learners, insufficient resources are a barrier to implementation (National Institute for Literacy, 2000).

Assessment and Accountability

Assessment and accountability are priority issues in adult ESL education and pose a challenge for distance education programs. State-administered adult education programs must follow assessment procedures and reporting guidelines established by the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS). Programs must report the number of hours of instruction the participants receive and educational gains they make. Distance educators must find ways to count hours of instruction for independent learners, use assessment measures that match what has been taught, and test learners at appropriate intervals as stated by test designers. One research study found that distance learners study, on average, less than 50 hours in a year (Young, Johnston, & Hapgood, 2002). This limited instructional time may make using standardized assessments difficult. For example, the developers of one standardized assessment that is acceptable for the NRS—the BEST Plus assessment for oral English proficiency—advise that a minimum of 60 hours of instruction occur before retesting (Center for Applied Linguistics, in print).

The Project IDEAL Support Center at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan provides technical assistance to 13 states that are conducting experiments to assess distance education practices. Two of the states, Massachusetts and North Carolina, use video-based distance education with their adult ESL population (*Project Ideal Update*, 2003). IDEAL has developed instruments to collect data on learner study time, NRS data, and learner test data, and the project is working with experts to discuss issues of assessment and accountability in distance education to make recommendations for best practices (Young, Johnston, & Hapgood, 2002).

Implementing Video-Based Distance Education

ESL programs that offer video-based distance education opportunities differ in how learners access the videos and in how instructional support is provided. There are several ESL video series that can be purchased or accessed from public broadcasting stations. Many are published as multimedia packages that include student books and teacher texts. For information and descriptions of current video series for adult English language learners, see the ERIC digest, *Using Videos With Adult English Language Learners* (Burt, 1999).

Accessing Videos

ESL programs with broadcast capability can arrange for broadcast through a local PBS station or a local access cable channel. Learners watch the episodes live or record them to watch later. Broadcasting the series at different times during the day and on different days of the week ensures reaching a wider audience. To broadcast, agencies should obtain a license from the copyright holder.

An alternative to broadcasting is a video-lending library. This is a viable option when learners do not have cable TV. ESL programs that allow learners to check out videos often collect a small refundable deposit to cover the cost of replacing a video that is not returned or is returned damaged. Prior to duplicating videos, agencies should obtain permission from the copyright holder and ensure that their master tape will produce quality duplicates.

Providing Instructional Support

Distance education that combines self-study with teacher support has shown promise in assisting beginning students and helping them enter an ESL delivery system (Center for Impact Research, 2002). This support may be offered at a distance, in person by appointment or at a drop-in lab, or it may consist of periodic class meetings.

Sometimes ESL programs—especially those affiliated with schools that have broadcast capability—choose to "book-end" their broadcast. That is, an instructor on TV precedes and follows the program itself with previewing and postviewing activities. These programs may have a call-in time for learners' questions or have learners send their work to the instructor.

An alternative to support at a distance is face-to-face meetings with an instructor. The instructor may have office hours and schedule appointments with individuals to review their work and provide feedback. The instructor may have a lab, during which distance-education learners drop in to have their work checked, receive feedback from the instructor, and work with other learners.

A third approach to instructional support is to schedule regular class meetings. In this model, the learners view the video and complete many of the language reinforcement exercises on their own time, outside of class. However, they also meet with the instructor and other learners, giving them an opportunity to develop their speaking skills.

Even without periodic class meetings, instructors can provide feedback on speaking skills through scheduled telephone conversations or through assignments that are called in to voice mail or submitted on audio tape (Ramirez and Savage, 2001).

Suggestions for Implementation

Use forms. Three forms that can help learners develop effective study habits are discussed below:

- ***Goal setting forms*** provide a means for learners to identify their goals for studying English and their priorities among the language skills.
- ***Study plan forms*** help learners plan study times by having them indicate the days and hours they will dedicate to studies.
- ***Learner logs*** provide learners with a means of recording information about learning activities; learners document the hours they study, their learning activities, and any questions or issues they had with the activities.

These forms provide information that guides teachers in focusing the limited instructional time available with video-based distance learning (Ramirez & Savage, 1999, 2001).

Build community among the learners and prevent learner isolation by implementing the following:

- Establish voice mail and email communication with learners and make regular phone calls to check learner progress and offer support.
- Provide a computer bulletin board forum so learners may share experiences, successes, and problems.
- Encourage learners to communicate with each other by exchanging phone numbers or email addresses.
- Exchange photos or post photos in locations where learners access materials.
- Set up assignments so that learners must share tasks and information with one another.
- Provide pencils, folders, or other realia that identify the program.
- Give certificates of completion or other rewards: When learners complete one level, give them the book for the next level.

Looking Ahead

Evaluation studies provide evidence that video-based distance education programs are popular with students and attract many who may be unwilling or unable to attend traditional classes. Teachers report that students in video-based distance education programs make education gains (Center for Impact Research, 2002; McClean, 1997). However, more rigorous research with control groups and standardized pre- and post-testing procedures are needed. As program administrators secure funding and have data that supports distance education, they may promote increased use of this approach. Finally, programs that use video-based distance education with English language learners need a mechanism for sharing experiences. This could result in improved delivery for programs already in place as well as a stimulus to implement such programs.

Program Descriptions

The authors each established a video-based ESL distance-learning program in their respective agencies. Both programs use the curriculum of *Crossroads Café* (Intelecom & Heinle and Heinle, 1996) but different delivery systems.

At **City College of San Francisco (CCSF)**, students can access the videos through the local cable or PBS channels; however, the majority of them choose to check the videos out from their instructor. Students meet once a week, and there are two class sessions for each video episode. These class sessions control the pace of the program. Students watch the videos and do the exercises in the work text on their own outside of class time; this is about 75% of the course work. The other 25% is through in-class exercises that develop speaking skills—many from the Teacher Resource Book, but some developed by the instructor. The class sessions are 3 hours, but instructors are paid for 5 hours because of the one-on-one contact with students between class sessions. These contacts are through voice mail and telephone appointments with the instructor. Students may also submit audiotapes that they make in response to questions about the episodes.

At **Mira Costa College (MCC)**, students access the videos through a checkout system. Instructional support is provided through specified hours at a drop-in learning center where there are both an instructor and an instructional aide responsible for *Crossroads Café*. Students can enroll at any time, and they proceed at their own pace. The instructional aide provides support to the instructor for checking out videos, record keeping, and follow-up phone calls to learners. During the specified hours at the drop-in learning center, a learner may be checking out a new video from the aide, some learners may be talking together or completing assignments in their work text, or doing extra activities created by the instructor and aide—all while the instructor is working with an individual learner. When a learner has not been heard from for 2 weeks, the instructional aide makes a follow-up phone call.

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